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Presidential Restraint

President Reagan, in the hostage crisis, is trying to show concern but not of the consuming kind. He seems to have before him the memory of President Jimmy Carter, who wrapped himself around the hostage crisis in Iran—and went down with it.

Over the weekend, the television networks went all out with anchormen recounting the hourly horrors aboard TWA Flight 847. The president, who has a deep aversion to negative situations, went off to Camp David, finally returning at midmorning Sunday.

From the first minute of what was to be a 444-day captivity for American hostages in Iran, Carter sought by every means to convey to the country his obsession with their fate. As the weeks turned into months, he forswore to leave the White House, doing penance, it seemed, for the great shadow that had fallen on the country.

Candidate Reagan berated Carter for his "vacillation and weakness" and inveighed against the "rabble" in Tehran. But his campaign staff feared what they called "an October surprise," by which they meant the release of the 52 Americans, and Reagan backed away from his angry rhetoric. Once October had safely passed, he returned to his theme that the hostages' continued captivity was "a humiliation and a disgrace to this country."

When the hostages were released—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini meanly held them until Reagan had been sworn in, with a drained and ashen Carter by his side—Reagan received them at the White House and assured them that a new day was dawning for the likes of their tormentors.

"Let terrorists be aware," he said, "that, when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retaliation."

But now that he is undergoing the "humiliation and disgrace" of Americans being held captive, abused, beaten and, in one instance, killed, he is markedly less militant.

The White House watchword is business as usual. The public is not to be unduly reminded of facts that, in Carter's time, proved intolerable to the country's image of itself as standing tall.

The president is ostentatiously keeping his schedule, to show, as spokesman Larry Speakes said, that he can cope with the crisis and also deal with regular business.

Speakes showed a president talking

to senators about a textile bill and meeting with legislators about chemical warfare. He also made a ceremony of receiving members of a bipartisan commission that is to investigate possibilities of "improving internal methods and procedures in the making of defense decisions."

Speakes frowned at a question about progress in the hostage situation, saying stiffly that he wanted to exhaust questions about the new commission before plunging into a downbeat topic.

He suggested that Reagan, up against the realities that faced Carter, may have moderated his views about how to deal with terrorists. Asked how Reagan could justify inaction, Speakes replied that it was not clear that this was "state-sponsored terrorism"—although Reagan had not made that distinction.

The hijackers were from some "shadowy" group, Speakes said, even though a Shiite Muslim leader named Nabih Berri, who has stepped forward to take responsibility for the situation at the Beirut airport, is justice minister in the Lebanese Cabinet.

"He hasn't changed," Speakes said of Reagan. "The world is changing."

What he means is that Reagan, who brought America back to its position of pride and prestige in the world, is in the hands of a Middle Eastern politician who passes for a "moderate" in those demented circles and that the world now looks different to him.

Retaliation, revenge and retribution are blood-stirring words. But they do not help when a powerful leader is impotent and faced with the necessity of saving American lives while not losing face for abandoning a stated principle of never negotiating.

But countermeasures can be more pedestrian and effective than the CIA's recently revealed undertaking: formation of a counterterrorist team that went off on its own and car-bombed innocent people. Today's atrocities are being justified by the Flight 847 gunmen because of that misbegotten lurch toward retaliation.

A return of sky marshals to international flights would do much more and at less expense. And banning Greek flights to the United States until security at Athens airport, where Flight 847 began its nightmare zig-zag through the unfriendly skies, is brought up to standard would stop smuggling of arms and grenades onto planes and might preclude the kind of vigil the country is keeping now.